Wales and Welsh Historiography

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Paper presented to the Social Change in the 21st Century Conference

Centre for Social Change Research
Queensland University of Technology
29 October 2004

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This paper is based on the research done for my PhD up to this point. Being barely a year into my canditure, this research has not yet progressed into detailed analysis of the topic, but regardless of this, several interesting features have emerged. The research question my thesis is based on is as follows: *What images of Wales and Welshness have historians constructed within Welsh history published between 1972 and 2003, why were these images chosen, and how do they fit into the broader debate over Welshness and Welsh identity?*

The question is based on three broad areas: British historiography, theories of historiography and theories of nations and nationalism. As I will discuss later, little research has been done into Welsh historiography, and therefore, these areas provide the conceptual framework for my research.

There have been three major developments in the field of British historiography since the start of the 1990s as a result of an intellectual debate over the solidity of the concept of Britain, both as a nation-state and as the basis for national identity. The first of these developments is that of new British history, which approaches the history of the four constituent members of Britain from a non-Anglocentric view point. The second has been the emergence of neo-nationalist histories, which have been complemented by the third and final development in the form of the search for a national identity outside of the concept of Britain.

The triggers for these developments are historical, in the sense that British historians are responding to an accumulation of political developments throughout the twentieth century. This new historical focus is indicative of a crisis in British identity, and is a partial response to the growth of neo-nationalism. New British history is conceptually significant as it broadly acknowledges the existence of separate and equal identities within the British state. Such acknowledgement is indicative of the growing validity of Scottish, Welsh and Irish history, and also of the rehabilitation of these identities as alternatives to an Anglo-British identity. This is a developing field and Richard Connors and R.J.D. Falconer identify in their article “Cornering the Cheshire Cat: Reflections on the ‘new British history’ and studies in early modern British identities” (2001), that historians demonstrate a distinct difficulty in defining current British identity. New British history also fails to acknowledge the significance of cultural identity, tending to focus instead on political history.

The emergence of this perspective has had two major effects. Firstly, it has facilitated the growth of historiographical analysis and rewriting of Scottish, Irish and, to a lesser extent, Welsh histories. Secondly, it has triggered a search for English and British identities. These developments are important as the decline of an all-encompassing British identity, and the corresponding awareness that England and Britain are not identical concepts has provided yet more room for the development of Welsh, Scottish and Irish identities outside the concept of Britain.

The search for national identity is, in fact, facilitated by another recent theoretical development in the field of nations and nationalism. Theorists of nations and nationalism are increasingly questioning the concept of the nation-state, in what could be considered a response to the rise of neo-nationalism in the West. Montserrat Guibernau and David McCrone argue that the juxtapositioning of the two

concepts was a result of the specific conditions of industrialisation and is far from a compulsory one. Stateless nations are indeed feasible. This is relevant to my research as Wales can be classified as a stateless nation. It is widely acknowledged to have retained some level of ethnic identity and has, over the last 150 years, been slowly building the institutional structure of a nation. There is an equally broad consensus, however, that Wales does not satisfy the criteria for a nation-state. The relevant state structure is that of Great Britain, and the existence of a Welsh desire for statehood is highly controversial.

There has been a less recent but equally important development in the same field concerning political and cultural nationalism. John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith argue that cultural nationalism is an equally valid expression of identity, and provides the means by which political movements can gain mass support. The stateless nation theory can be added to Hutchinson's and Smith's work to create a different version of nationalism and a wider concept of the state. Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties have apparently adopted this approach through their policies for attaining independence within the framework of the European Union.

The research being conducted is, however, essentially one of historiography. Historiography, the study of how, and to some extent why, history is written is based on the fact that history is produced by humans who have imperfect access to the past, and who are to some extent influenced by the society of which they are a part. Theoretically speaking, historical knowledge is open to critical examination as the result of the relationship between 'facts' and 'interpretation'. There is considerable argument within the field of history over the selection and use of facts and, correspondingly, over the portrayal of history.

Historians, while limited by the facts that are known and are relatively independent, are free to interpret these facts according to their interests (McCullagh, 2004). These interpretations must be credible, but will differ under the influence of emotional, political and intellectual bias (Fulbrook, 2002). Problems arise in these interpretations when ideology becomes the primary motivation behind the history (Spitzer, 1996). Ideology can vary in content, from political party bias to religious and cultural bias.

The ideological basis that is particularly relevant to my research is that of nationalism and national identity. The thirty-one years that my research covers witnessed a rise, fall, and re-rise of political nationalism in Wales, and a steady growth of cultural nationalism. Both expressions of nationalism were controversial. There is a substantial volume of research available in this field, and even here there is little consensus on the content of Welsh national identity and nationalism, and evidence of a debate over whether either really exist. Research generally focuses on four areas: language, religion, politics and symbols. Of these, language is the most controversial, with a wide-ranging debate over the importance of the language to Welsh identity and culture (Davies, 1995; Thomas, 1997; Hughes, 2000).

This research has not produced a simple definition of Welshness, and all proposals remain controversial. Welshness appears to be a concept in progress. This may well be related to the rapid political and economic developments that have impacted on Wales, and on Britain, since 1972. Correspondingly, there is considerable room for interpretation in Welsh history, interpretations that remain credible while reflecting the interests and beliefs of the historian. There is also room for interpretations that are biased, either in favour of Welshness, or against its continued existence.

It is important to be aware of these issues in Welsh history, as all theories of nations and nationalism agree that history provides the basis for culture and, therefore, for nationalism. The history that is published, particularly the popular histories aimed at the non-specialised reader can, from these theories, be assumed to possess some form of relationship with the popular expression of Welshness, whether this relationship be reflective or influential.

As yet, the form of this relationship has not been fully analysed. A broad analysis of the popular histories written between 1972 and 2003 has, however, revealed the existence of this relationship, and has also indicated that Welsh history is written as a part of a larger British historiography. Both of these areas will form significant parts of this thesis and are, at this point in time, providing the direction for further research.

The books selected for the analysis of Welsh history were popular histories, written for a non-specialised audience without a presumed knowledge of Welsh history. Correspondingly, these books provided only select bibliographies, rather than extensive footnoting. These books were chosen because they are accessible to the general public, and were written with this audience in mind. They will, therefore, be most likely to either reflect or shape the public expression of Welshness. The intended readership of each book will, in the thesis itself, come under deeper analysis as some of the books, notably the University of Wales series, included first year university students in its general audience. This indicates a potential overlap between professional history and that produced for the mass population. If so, this overlap would have fascinating implications for the relationship between professional Welsh history and the historical identity presented in the selected books. Similarly, consideration will be given to the publication figures of the books, as this will reflect their potential impact on the Welsh people.

The chronological limits of 1972 to 2003 were set to include two of the major constitutional changes in Britain in the post-World War Two period: Britain's entrance into the European Economic Community in 1972, and the creation of the Welsh Assembly after the devolution referendum in 1997. Both events have had substantial impacts on Wales as a nation, and on Wales as a part of Britain. The closing date of 2003 will facilitate the analysis of the first impacts of devolution on the way Welsh history is written.

The broad analysis of the relevant Welsh history books revealed the existence of three periods that displayed different approaches to Welsh history and identity. These three periods matched major political developments and, interestingly, the changing perceptions of the concept of Britain. The first period covers from 1972 to 1979, from Britain's entry into the EEC to the first devolution referendum. The second period extended from 1980 to 1992, and the third from 1993 to 2003. To some extent, the second period is defined by the first and the third. It begins in the aftermath of the 1979 devolution referendum and concludes with Britain's accession to the Maastricht Treaty and with the emergence of the new British history. This new British history consists of a conceptual change based on the declining relevance of the portrayal of Britain as a unitary, imperial world power. Correspondingly, this change is reflected in the final period of 1993 to 2003. British sovereignty had been challenged by the Maastricht Treaty, and in university circles as well as political circles, the concept of Britain was under siege. It is perhaps not coincidental that this period also saw the devolution of Scotland and Wales.

There were four books published between 1972 and 1979, two of which were part of a series sponsored by the University of Wales. These two, *A History of Wales, 1485-1660* by Hugh Thomas, and *A History of Wales, 1660-1815* by E.D.Evans, and *A*

Short History of Wales: Welsh Life and Customs from Prehistoric Times to the Present Day by A.H.Dodd (1972), approach Welsh history from similar perspectives. All three authors create a picture of Wales that has been highly dependent on England. English influence and actions are portrayed as generally advantageous for the political and economic development of Wales, and certainly not forced upon an unwilling subject with the intention of exterminating the Welsh as a people. Yet all three indicate that there is for Wales to cease to be dependent on England, and ask if it is not time for Wales to become politically as well as culturally defined.

There are, obviously, some substantial differences between the texts, in both time span and portrayal of major events and significant periods. The similarities are, nonetheless, striking. Thomas and Dodd both cover the union of Wales and England under Henry VII and Henry VIII of England. In his discussion of this early period, Thomas is clear on three points. He does not agree that Henry the VII betrayed the Welsh people through the gradual incorporation of Wales into England, he does not consider the Acts of Union to be aimed at the extermination of the Welsh language or the Welsh people, and he does not see the Welsh people as uniformly disadvantaged by the Union. On the contrary, the Henries acceded to the demands of the more influential section of the Welsh nobles by constructing legislation that countermanded the penal legislation that was imposed after the earlier suppression of the Glyn Dwr uprising. Thomas argues that the legal Acts of Union were in fact, Tudor expediency, not acts of maliciousness. The Welsh nobles accepted the resulting Anglicisation as a reasonable price for the ability to participate in the government and economy.

Dodd's version of the Acts of Union is remarkably similar to that of Thomas, with an increased emphasis on Welsh culture. Dodd, as with Thomas, portrays the Welsh nobles as pragmatic, almost Machiavellian, in their approach to the English crown. The Welsh benefited economically and politically from the developments, and the gradual loss of traditional Welsh culture, whilst noted, is not considered a serious problem. To a large extent, Dodd is actually detailing the Welsh side of English history, and their gradual convergence.

These two books, and that of Evans, present an unusual and slightly contradictory approach to Welsh history. The reader is left with the overall impression that without English influence, Wales would not have developed into a modern nation. Yet all three authors, in either introduction or conclusion, are encouraging about the development of an institutionally defined Wales. It is an unusual combination and could be read as saying that interaction with 'England' in its various forms, has brought Welsh development to a point where it could potentially function as an independent nation.

As previously mentioned, however, these three books do not present identical versions of Welsh history. E.D.Evans and Dodd differ on the role of Nonconformity in the construction of Welsh identity. Dodd argues that Nonconformity gave Wales a distinctive religious, political and moral life. Evans, while acknowledging the role of Nonconformist denominations in Wales, demythologises religion.

As yet, the reasons for these similarities and differences have not yet been analysed. The fourth book, however, suggests some possibilities. Gwynfor Evans, unlike the previous three authors, is not a professional historian but a member of Plaid Cymru (The Party of Wales), and its first elected member. His political bias is evident throughout the text, as is his personal dislike of England and the English. Given these facts, it is possible that *Land of My Fathers: 2000 years of Welsh history* (1974, English translation) was written to express an alternative, nationalist view of Welsh

history. Gwynfor Evans does acknowledge the pragmatic loyalty of the Welsh nobles to the English crown, but sees nothing beneficial in this loyalty. It created, instead, the foundations of the sad ruin of the Welsh nation in the 1970s. This result is noted by Thomas, but as a dilemma, a choice of the Welsh people. Evans clearly sees it as a sacrilege, a travesty and a betrayal.

Given the failure of the 1979 devolution referendum in Wales, and its extremely low turn out, it is possible that E.D.Evans, Dodd and Thomas were more accurate in their portrayal of England as beneficial to Wales. In 1979, the Welsh people appeared to agree, when the heart of Plaid territory voted 'no'. There is a definite echo of divided loyalties in these three books, divided between an independent Wales and Wales as a constituent member of Britain. This, it seems, was possibly a reflection of a debate in Wales, leading up to the 1979 devolution. Gwynfor Evans' book could reflect one of the more extreme sections of debate, possibly from those responsible for the growth of political nationalism in Wales in the 1970s. As yet, unanswered questions.

It is, to some extent, easier to account for the change of perspective in the second period, 1980 to 1992. While the historians of the 1970s tended to construct a Wales that through the catalyst of English influence had reached a point where independence was feasible, the 1980s focused on the question of Welshness. Welsh history is used to answer the question of who and what the Welsh are, and the answers are surprisingly different. The overall impression is of a Wales that is unsure of its identity and of its future.

Seven books were examined in this period: Kenneth O.Morgan's *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (1982), Gareth Elwyn Jones' *Modern Wales: A Concise History c.1485-1979* (1984), Wynford Vaughan-Thomas' *Wales: A History* (1985), Gwyn A. Williams' *When Was Wales?* (1985), D.Gareth Evans' third volume of the University of Wales series, *A History of Wales, 1815-1906* (1989), Philip Jenkins *A History of Modern Wales, 1536-1990* and the English translation of *A History of Wales* by John Davies (1994), published in Welsh in 1990.

The answers offered within these books to the question of Welsh identity differ quite substantially. There is no agreement on what Welshness is, or even on which bits of history express Welshness and which bits merely illustrate the Anglicised of Wales. Both question and answer reflect the Wales of the 1980s. It is possible that the question was triggered by the rejection of devolution in 1979, the decline of the Welsh language and distinctive voting patterns, and the economic repression. The answers reveal a divide in Wales, commonly referred to as the North-South divide, referring to the difference between the Anglicised, industrial south and the so called Y Fro Gymraig, the Welsh heartland that remains predominantly rural, Welsh speaking and Plaid voting. The histories portrayed by the authors suggest that hidden within each side of this division are other minority views, revealing a broad range of definitions of Welshness.

All seven books use Welsh history to justify their argument for the current existence or non-existence of Wales as a nation and as a cultural entity. Five of the seven argue that, while Wales has been re-formed countless times, each reconstruction has been essentially Welsh. Thus, for these authors, the Wales of the 1980s and the early 1990s is Welsh, and not merely a region of England. Kenneth O. Morgan's book, *Rebirth of a Nation: A History of Modern Wales* (1982), exemplifies this process. Morgan covers the hundred years from the 1880s to the 1980s and focuses mainly on the political and economic developments of the period. Culture is considered, but from the perspective of the above issues. Wales is portrayed as a nation with a long political history, but also as a nation moving into modernity.

Morgan traces the rise and fall of Welsh industry, political expression, language and culture, presenting the changes in these areas as a natural development, rather than a total tragedy. He presents a convincing argument that Welshness is not attached irremovably to any institution or practice, but is deeper and less fragile. A sense of Welshness is founded in a shared history, in shared experience: even the Wales of the 1980s, with a decline language, a dying industry, and voting patterns that echo those of England, remains Welsh.

Philip Jenkins, in contrast, uses Welsh history to argue the opposite. It is clear throughout the book *A History of Modern Wales, 1536-1990* (1992), that Jenkins considers Wales to be little more than a region of England, possessing idiosyncrasies along the lines of those observable in Cornwall and Northumbria. The process of regionalisation began with the Acts of Union when Wales was, effectively, civilised by England, continued with an industrialisation that occurred in "a society essentially homogenous to that of England" (Jenkins, 1992: 235), and was finalised by the growing divide between the north and the south in the twentieth century. As such, Jenkins' answer to the question of whether Wales exists, whether Welshness was salvageable, is an emphatic 'no'.

The question arises – why the difference? This is, as yet, unanswered, but will be investigated. It possibly reflects a debate that was current in Wales in the 1980s and 1990s, and given the decade between the books, alterations in circumstances in Wales. This latter aspect can not entirely account for the difference, however, as John Davies *A History of Wales* was published in 1990, and argues that Wales and Welsh identity and culture have survived into the final decades of the twentieth century. Social background could also contribute to the differing views, as Davies, at least, is a Welsh speaker while Jenkins hails from Port Talbot, a heavily Anglicised area.

The final three books that were considered differ in emphasis from both the earlier periods. All three approach Welsh history from a practical angle. They are, however, less concerned with the issue of the Union, as occurred in the 1970s, and more concerned with explaining the origins of the different Welsh identities and the possible inclusion of all Welsh identities in a European Wales, as opposed to a British Wales.

This last thematic aspect is significantly different to any of the earlier books which rarely mentioned the European Community or, in the post-Maastricht era, the European Union. None of the authors portray this turn to Europe as the result of a passionate nationalism, however. These developments are eminently practical, although the reasons given for the alteration in focus do vary between the three authors. There is, however, a general sense that Wales is merely switching economic and political umbrellas due to the outdated nature of the Union and Great Britain. This latter impression is fascinating, as it appears to reflect the developments that have occurred within the field of new British history.

D. Gareth Evans' closing volume of the University of Wales series, *A History of Wales, 1906-2000* (2000), combines identity and the EU in a fascinating manner. The gradual loss of traditional Welsh culture and the national foundations of chapel, Liberalism, industry, Labour and language have merely enabled the Welsh nation to move more successfully into modernity and towards a future role in the EU. In stressing this form of Wales and Welshness, Evans is also broadening the context of the term, implicitly rejecting the concept that only Welsh speakers can be Welsh.

J. Graham Jones follows this broad thematic base in *A Pocket Guide: The History of Wales, New Edition* (1998). It is almost as if both Jones and Evans see Europe and the EU as a way of cooling the debate over Welshness by providing a new, less controversial umbrella under which the various Welsh identities can co-exist. Neither author questions the existence of Wales or a Welsh identity, accepting that these concepts will change with time.

Jones and Evans both present Wales as a politically aware nation, and use this portrayal to gradually lead into devolution, the National Assembly and the European Union. Jeremy Black, however, in *A New History of Wales* (2000), reaches an entirely different conclusion. He portrays a culturally alive Wales that relied politically on England until the post-World War Two erosion of deference, and the corresponding decline of confidence in established ideas and institutions. This decline opened doors for a new structure to supersede the old which has, in turn, facilitated the increased debate over Welsh identity and interests. Black is not entirely positive about devolution, however, arguing that the success or failure of the Welsh Assembly will determine the Welsh role and position in both the EU and the United Kingdom.

The conceptual basis of this approach to devolution, Britain and the EU differs from that of Jones and Evans who approach Welsh history from a purely Welsh basis: the focus is Wales and England is mentioned only where absolutely necessary. Black, in contrast, while still focusing on Wales, retains an obvious awareness of the constant interaction of the constituent members of the United Kingdom. Both foci represent significant developments when compared with the earlier periods. In the 1970s, the historians analysed frequently dealt with the Welsh side of English history, and in the 1980s, felt that Welsh history required justification through a reference to nationhood and identity. By the final period, Welsh history of a Welsh nation was acceptable, and to some extent, it was possible to deal with it within the broader context of the United Kingdom without denying the existence of a Welsh nation.

This broad analysis has demonstrated the general changes in the way Welsh history has been written from 1972 to 2003. Future research will investigate in more detail the reasons behind the expressions and the changes, and consider how and why each historian has chosen to construct the images of Wales in his book. This will, in turn, be examined in the context of the broader debate over Welshness and Welsh identity in Wales between 1972 and 2003. The differences identified thus far do, however, provide a solid basis from which to begin this investigation.

This investigation will also be based in the broader historiographical developments that occurred in Britain from the early 1990s. Interestingly, it would appear that these developments facilitated the alteration in focus evident in the final period of Welsh history relevant to this research. As previously mentioned, new British history has begun to unravel the concept of a unitary, imperial British world power, allowing historians to address the separate histories of Britain's constituent members while acknowledging their political position as part of the British state. It is also possible that the questioning of Welsh identity apparent in the books of the 1980s and early 1990s occurred as a part of the challenge to the concept of Britain. It is evident that Scotland underwent a similar process, and that England followed in the 1990s.

Thus this research question, while specifically focused on Welsh history, is relevant to the whole of Britain. It is a part of the gradual rewriting of the histories of Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland. If the theorists of nations and nationalism are correct, then an awareness of what is occurring in the British history is important as it interrelates with the political expression of nationalism. This research will, hopefully,

begin to fill this gap in knowledge about the way in which Welsh history has been constructed.

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